

AAENA

A Novella

by

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*Adapted from the original screenplay *Aaena**

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CHAPTER ONE

The Bloom

I want to start with the light, because that is how it actually started. Not with the gunshot, not with the shape in the corridor. With light, the ordinary, indifferent light of a September morning falling through the window of Hostel Block C, Room 214, on a boy who had no idea he was already living on borrowed time.

That boy was me.

I had arrived at the university four days earlier with one suitcase, a mother's voice still ringing in my ears (eat properly, call every evening, don't stay up too late), and a nervousness so total it felt like a second skin. The suitcase itself had been my father's once, a hard-shelled thing the color of old rust, and I remember thinking, as I hauled it up the hostel stairs, that it looked exactly as out of place as I felt: a relic from a smaller life, arriving somewhere too large for it. By the fourth day the nervousness had started to peel away. That is what a new life does to you if you let it. It sands down the sharp edges of fear until all that's left is possibility, and I let it, gladly, the way you let a wound close over without checking first whether anything is still inside it.

Awais moved into the room across the hall on my second day. He knocked before I'd even unpacked my books, stuck his head through the door with the kind of grin that assumes friendship is a foregone conclusion, and said, "You look like a man who doesn't know where the cafeteria is." I didn't. He was taller than me by an inch, broad through the shoulders in the way of boys who'd played cricket seriously before deciding it wasn't worth the knees, and he had a habit, I would learn, of talking with his whole body, hands cutting the air, eyebrows doing half the punctuation his sentences didn't bother with. He walked me there himself, talking the entire way about a professor he'd already decided he hated and a cricket match he'd already decided we were going to watch together that weekend. By the time we reached the food line, I had a friend. It was that easy. It is always that easy, in the beginning.

The next weeks blur pleasantly in my memory now, the way a good song blurs into a good mood. Lecture halls that smelled of chalk and ambition, sunlight lying in long yellow rectangles across the desks by eleven. Late nights arguing about nothing over cheap tea poured from a dented steel kettle that lived, by unspoken agreement, in Awais's room. The particular comfort of finding your people, Awais loudest among them, but also Hamza with his terrible jokes, each one arriving with the confidence of a much better joke, and Ali who was already, at nineteen, the most reliable person any of us knew, the one who remembered whose turn it was to buy milk and who always, without being asked, walked the youngest and most homesick of us back to our rooms after the tea had gone cold and the talk had gone quiet. We were building something without realizing we were building it: a small architecture of trust, four boys who had decided, without ever saying so out loud, that they would look out for each other. I did not know yet how load-bearing that

architecture would turn out to be, or how much weight a thing built in three careless weeks can be asked to hold.

I remember thinking, somewhere in that first golden month, lying awake at two in the morning not from fear but from a kind of pleasant disbelief at my own good fortune, that I had never felt so unafraid. I want you to hold on to that sentence. I want you to remember that I said it, because everything that follows is the slow, patient dismantling of it, brick by brick, in a demolition so careful it took me two months to notice the house was gone.



It was a Tuesday. I know it was a Tuesday because I had a quiz the next morning I hadn't studied for, cell biology, a subject I had already decided, with the swift unearned confidence of a first-year, that I did not need to take seriously. I was at my desk near midnight, the hostel gone quiet around me in that particular way old buildings go quiet, not silent so much as holding their breath, my lamp the only light on in the room, throwing a small warm circle over my notebook and leaving the rest of the room in a soft, forgiving dark. That is when I heard it. A scuffle. Muffled voices pitched too low for words but too urgent for anything good, the kind of urgency that travels through a wall before the meaning of it does. Then something that might have been a shout, cut off too fast, the way a sound is cut off when a hand or something worse arrives to cut it off.

I told myself it was nothing. Boys wrestling in the courtyard, someone's prank gone a little far, the ordinary rowdy noise of a hostel at midnight, boys who did not yet know how to carry their own energy quietly. I told myself this even as I was already crossing to the window, already easing the curtain aside with two fingers, careful, absurdly, not to let it rustle, already looking down into the dark.

There were four of them. I couldn't see faces, only shapes, the particular geometry of men who have surrounded another man and do not intend to let him go, a loose ring closing slowly the way water closes over a dropped stone. The courtyard lamp at the far corner had been dead for weeks, a maintenance request three of us had filed and none of us had followed up on, and in its absence the whole scene played out in a charcoal grey that made every shape provisional, uncertain, the kind of dark that asks you to fill in details it isn't giving you. And then there was a sound I will never, as long as I exist in any form, be able to unhear. A gunshot does not sound like it does in films. It is smaller and larger at the same time, a crack that seems to happen inside your own skull before you understand it happened forty feet below you, a sound with no echo to it, no drama, just a flat percussive fact dropped into the night like something knocked off a shelf.

A second shot followed the first, closer together than I would have expected, as if the first had only confirmed an intention rather than fulfilled it. And then a third, closer still, more deliberate, the kind of shot that isn't fired in panic but administered, like a full stop at the end of a sentence someone had decided must end here, must end now, must end in exactly this way and no other. The man on the ground did not move again. His arm was bent at an angle no sleeping man's arm

bends at, folded under him with a wrongness that had nothing to do with comfort and everything to do with the sudden absence of anyone left inside him to arrange it better. I remember that detail with a clarity that frightens me more than the gunshots do, even now. The angle. The stillness of it. The way stillness, past a certain point, stops looking like rest and starts looking like something else entirely, something with a different name.

I don't remember stepping back from the window so much as I remember suddenly being three feet from it, my back against my desk, my breath coming in useless little sips that never seemed to reach all the way down. My hands had gone cold and would not stop shaking, a fine, continuous tremor I pressed flat against my thighs as if pressure alone could argue it into stopping. I did not turn on the room light. I did not call for help. I did not do any of the things a reasonable person does in the presence of a crime, because some deep unreasoning part of me had already decided that light and noise were the two things that might turn me from a witness into a second target. I sat in my chair until the sky outside went from black to the grey of almost morning, watching the shadow the curtain made on the wall, certain, with the particular certainty of the very frightened, that every one of those shadows was about to become a shape, and every shape was about to become a man, and every man was about to remember exactly which window he had looked down from.

By the time Awais found me, I had not slept, had not eaten, had not moved from that chair in nine hours, my legs gone stiff and strange beneath me when I finally tried to stand. "You look like you've seen a ghost," he said, grinning, still holding the door frame with one hand the way he always did, and then he actually looked at me, properly looked, the way you look at someone once you've registered that something about the picture is wrong, and the grin came apart on his face like wet paper.

"I saw a guy get shot," I told him. My voice didn't sound like mine. It came out flat and small, a stranger's voice borrowed for the occasion. "Killed. Right outside. Last night."

I watched belief try to arrive on his face and fail, the way you'd watch someone reach for a light switch in an unfamiliar house and find only wall. He was already shaking his head before I finished the sentence, already assembling the argument that would become, in one form or another, the argument everyone would make to me for the rest of my life. There would have been police. There would have been sirens, tape, a body removed at dawn, whispers over breakfast, a name passed from table to table by lunch. There was none of that. There was only a courtyard, swept and ordinary, sunlight already climbing the far wall as if nothing at all had happened against it in the night, and a boy who hadn't slept insisting he had watched a man die in it.

"You've been cramming too hard," Awais said, and there was real kindness in it, which somehow made it worse, made it harder to argue with, because you cannot fight kindness the way you can fight disbelief. "Get some sleep. It was a nightmare, yaar. A bad one. That's all."

I wanted, more than I have ever wanted anything, for him to be right. I wanted it so badly that for one entire minute, standing there in my doorway with the morning going on obliviously behind him, I almost managed to believe it myself.

CHAPTER TWO

The Shape in the Corridor

For a few days I let them talk me into it. A nightmare. Stress. The strangeness of a new place working on an overtired mind, a brain still adjusting to a new city's noise and a new bed's silence. I even managed, for whole stretches of an afternoon, to believe it myself, to sit in a lecture and take notes and laugh at Hamza's terrible jokes and feel, briefly, like a person for whom nothing was wrong. That is the cruelest part of what came next. I had almost made my peace with being wrong. I had almost let myself have that.

Then, on a Thursday evening, I came back from the library later than I meant to, arms full of photocopied notes I would never read, the corridor lights buzzing with that faint fluorescent hum they always have, that sound you stop hearing after the first week and only hear again when something else has made you alert to everything. I stopped so completely that the boy behind me nearly walked into my back, muttered something irritated, and went around. At the far end of the hallway, perhaps forty feet down, where the last working light gave out into a soft pooling shadow, someone was standing. Not walking, not turning, not doing any of the small restless things a person does when they occupy a hallway, shifting weight, checking a phone, glancing at a door number. Standing. Perfectly, unnaturally still. Facing me.

Build like the man from the courtyard, I knew this without being able to say how I knew it, some catalogue of shoulder-width and posture my body had apparently kept without consulting me, and wearing a shirt so dark down the front that it took my mind a full, sickening second to understand the darkness was wet, that it had a sheen to it under even that little light, the specific wet-black gleam of a stain still fresh enough to catch what light there was.

I did not see a face. I want to be precise about that, because precision is the only thing I have left that feels like sanity, the one instrument I still trust to measure anything. There was a suggestion of a face, the way a shadow suggests a shape on a wall at dusk, and no more than that, no features I could later have described to a police sketch artist, nothing so specific as eyes or a mouth. But I felt looked at. I have never in my life felt so entirely, so surgically looked at, as though whatever attention was coming off that shape had a temperature, and the temperature was directed, narrow, precisely at me and no one else in that hallway. My skin knew it before my mind did. Every hair on my arms had lifted before I had consciously registered what I was seeing, the body arriving at terror a full second ahead of the brain that was meant to be in charge of deciding such things.

I don't remember the walk back to my room. There is simply a gap where that memory should be, a held breath with no middle to it. I remember the door, and the lock, and my own hands on the lock, fumbling twice before the key found its groove, my fingers slick with a sweat I hadn't noticed forming, and then Awais's fist against the wood a few minutes later, three sharp knocks

and his voice asking, half laughing, half not, why I'd nearly taken his head off slamming past him in the hall.

I told him everything, the words coming out faster than I could organize them, tripping over each other, the shirt, the stillness, the sense of being watched by something that did not need eyes to watch, and I watched something in his face that I hadn't seen there before. Not disbelief this time, not exactly. Worry, the specific, careful worry people reserve for something they've decided is broken and must now be handled gently, the way you'd carry a cracked plate you still needed to use. "Umer." He said my name like he was testing whether I'd flinch at it, watching my face the way you'd watch for a reaction to a diagnosis. "Listen to yourself. If someone got shot, and lived, he's in a hospital. If he died, he's in the ground. Either way, he is not standing in our hostel corridor at nine at night. You understand that this is not possible?"

It was, of course, a perfectly reasonable thing to say. That was the trouble with all of them, in those weeks. They were never unkind, and they were never unreasonable. Their reasonableness was, in its way, the worst part, because it left me nothing to push against. They simply did not believe me, with the calm, immovable certainty of people standing on solid ground looking at someone flailing in water, wondering, not unkindly, why he doesn't just stand up, not understanding that from where I was, there was no ground left to stand on.

I tried Hamza next, catching him alone in the corridor before he could invent a reason to be elsewhere, then Ali, hoping one of them might see what the others couldn't, might have some crack in their certainty I could slip through. I got the same look from each of them in turn, concern arranging itself carefully around the edges of doubt like a bandage arranged around a wound too raw to touch directly, and the same gentle suggestion, phrased a little differently each time, that I should talk to someone. A counselor. A doctor. Someone qualified to tell me I was imagining things, as though a diagnosis, a name for it, would make the shape at the end of the corridor politely disappear, would reach into the hallway and switch it off like a light.

Their disbelief did something I didn't expect. It didn't make me doubt what I'd seen, not yet, not for a long while still. It made me feel, for the first time, entirely alone with it, as if the four of us had been standing in the same room and only I had noticed the walls were on fire, and worse, as if my noticing it, my saying it out loud, was itself becoming the thing they were most worried about, more worried about than any fire.



The figure did not oblige me by staying in one place, and I came, in a horrible way, to almost respect its thoroughness. Over the following two weeks it found me in a lecture hall, seated in the back row where no one else sat, present for the length of one blink and gone the next, so that I began arriving early just to claim that seat myself, as if occupying it could deny it the space. It found me in the reflection of a bus window, standing on a pavement that had no one standing on it when I turned around fast enough to hurt my neck. It found me across the dining hall, still, patient,

watching me eat with an attention that made the food turn to paper in my mouth, flavorless, difficult to swallow. I began counting my meals by how many bites I could take before I had to look up and check, three bites, look, four bites, look, a private ritual none of my friends noticed because by then they had mostly stopped watching me eat at all.

Each sighting cost me something I couldn't get back. Sleep, first, thin and interrupted and full of a listening quality even in the depths of it, as if some part of me stayed awake on guard duty all night. Then appetite. And then, this was the one that frightened me most, the simple, unexamined trust that my own eyes were reporting the world to me honestly, the kind of trust you don't know you're running on until it's gone. I had never before had to ask myself, is this real, before believing what I saw. Now I asked it constantly, dozens of times a day, at every flicker of movement at the edge of a room, and the asking itself was its own small torment, because a mind that has to interrogate its own evidence is a mind that has already started to come apart at the seams, whether or not the thing it saw was real. I did not know then which was worse: that the figure might be real, or that I might be the kind of person who could no longer tell.

I went back to the courtyard on a Sunday morning when I knew it would be empty, the whole hostel still sleeping off Saturday, sunlight thin and slanted and almost kind on the old stone. I don't know what I was hoping to prove, except that I needed, badly, for something outside my own skull to confirm what I already knew to be true, some anchor dropped into the world that other people could see too. And there, God help me, there it was. A stain low against the paving stones, dark and unmistakable, roughly the size of a dinner plate, its edges gone slightly rust-brown at the rim the way old blood does, exactly where the third shot had found him. I stood over it with my heart going so hard I could feel it in my teeth, and for the first time in two weeks I felt something other than fear. I felt vindicated, light-headed with it, the particular euphoria of a person who has just watched the world agree with them after weeks of being told they were wrong.

I ran. I didn't stop to think, didn't stop to plan what I would say, just ran across the courtyard and up the stairs two at a time. I found Awais, found Hamza, pulled them both by the sleeve back to that spot with a story tumbling out of me faster than I could shape it into sentences, watching their faces soften, just slightly, with the possibility that I might, after all, have been telling the truth, Awais's eyebrows drawing together in something that might, in better light, have been the beginning of belief.

The stain was gone. Not faded, gone, the stone beneath it pale and clean and dry, as if someone had taken a brush and a bucket to it in the twenty minutes it had taken me to fetch them, not a trace, not a shadow of a trace. I got down on my knees anyway and ran my fingers over the stone, searching for even the faintest discoloration, anything the eye might have missed that touch could still find. There was nothing. Cold stone, swept clean, ordinary as a floor that had never known anything worse than rain. I stood there while three friends looked at an empty patch of pavement and then at me, and I watched the last of their patience curdle into something closer to pity, a look I would come to know well and dread more than almost anything else in that whole terrible season.

“This has to stop, Umer,” Awais said, and his voice had gone quiet in a way that frightened me more than shouting would have, quiet the way a voice goes when someone has decided the person in front of them needs to be handled with more care than they'd have given a stranger. “You're scaring us. You're scaring yourself. This isn't real. It's going to hurt you if you keep this up.”

I slid down against the courtyard wall after they left, the stone rough and cold through my shirt, and I let myself cry there in the open for the first time since it had begun, ugly, wracking sobs I would have been ashamed of a month earlier, and it was in that particular moment of total surrender, no fight left in me, no argument left to make, that I looked up and found the figure standing eight feet away, watching me weep, its face still nothing but a suggestion of shadow, its silence somehow the loudest thing I had ever heard, louder than the gunshots, louder than anything, a silence with a kind of patience in it, as if it had all the time in the world and knew, better than I did, exactly how this would end.

CHAPTER THREE

The Weight of Being Alone

There is a particular kind of silence that settles over a person once everyone around them has quietly, kindly, decided they are unwell. It isn't the silence of an empty room. It's the silence of a full one, where every voice has agreed, without saying so, to speak to you differently than it used to: more gently, more carefully, the way you'd speak to something that might break, or to a child who has just been told something too large for them to hold.

That was the silence I lived in for the next month.

Awais still knocked on my door, out of habit or loyalty or some mixture of both I never worked out. He still walked with me to the cafeteria, still saved me a seat in the lectures we shared, arm draped over the empty chair the way he'd always done. But something had shifted underneath the friendship, some quiet recalibration none of us named out loud. He watched me now the way you watch a pot that might be about to boil over, a glance that flicked to my face every few minutes and away again before I could catch it. Hamza started finding reasons to be elsewhere, small excuses, a group project, a headache, a cousin visiting, that were never quite convincing and that we both, I think, understood were not meant to be. Ali, the reliable one, was the only one who kept trying, kept asking how I was sleeping, kept suggesting, so softly it never once felt like an accusation, that maybe I should call my parents, maybe I should see the campus counselor, maybe there was no shame in it, his voice always careful, always kind, always underlined with a worry he was too good a friend to hide from me entirely.

I understand now, more than I did then, that they were not cruel. They were doing what frightened, well-meaning people do when a friend starts speaking a language they can't follow, a dialect made entirely of things that had not happened, at least not to anyone but me. They reach for the nearest explanation that lets the world keep making sense, the explanation that doesn't require them to rebuild anything. Stress. Trauma. An overactive mind. Anything, really, except the possibility that the world itself had come slightly, catastrophically unstitched, and that the seam had opened directly beneath my feet and no one else's.



The figure kept its appointments with a diligence nothing else in my life still had, more reliable than my own sleep, more reliable than my own appetite. Some nights it stood at the foot of my bed when I woke at two or three in the morning, not moving, not approaching, simply present, the way a held breath is present, the way a held breath waits to be let out. I stopped telling people when I saw it, because there was no longer any point, because I had learned exactly what shape their faces would make before I'd finished the first sentence, and because some new, exhausted part of

me had started to wonder if perhaps they were right, if perhaps the kindest thing left to do was to stop insisting.

Perhaps I was building a haunted house out of nothing but sleeplessness and grief for a life that used to feel safe. It was, I told myself in my more lucid hours, not an unreasonable theory. Homesickness curdled into something stranger. A mind, unwatched, doing what unwatched minds sometimes do.

But grief for what, exactly? That was the question that kept circling back on itself in the small hours, the one I could never quite finish asking before sleep or exhaustion pulled me under. I hadn't lost anyone. I hadn't lost anything, as far as any of them could tell, as far as I could tell myself, lying there cataloguing my life for some absence large enough to explain what was happening to me and finding none. And yet the losing feeling was unmistakable, a loss so total it had no edges, nothing to point to and say, here, this is what is gone, only a pervasive, low-grade certainty that something essential had already been taken from me and that I was the last one in the building not to have noticed.

I stopped going to most of my lectures. What was the use of taking notes on cell biology when the walls of the lecture hall themselves had started to feel provisional, temporary, like a set that might be struck the moment I stopped watching it, like nothing around me had any more permanence than a held breath? I stopped calling my mother as often, not because I loved her less but because I could not bear the particular ache of her voice, bright and ordinary and three hundred kilometres away from whatever was happening to me, asking if I was eating enough, asking about my classes, a version of a conversation from a life I no longer seemed to be living. I lost, over that month, nearly seven kilograms, my clothes beginning to hang differently on me, my face in the mirror each morning a little more hollowed than the one before, though I noticed this the way you notice weather, distantly, as something happening to the world rather than to me.

The isolation, I came to understand, was worse than the fear. Fear, at least, is a kind of attention, sharp, focused, alive, a thing that makes you feel, however unpleasantly, entirely present in your own body. Isolation is a slow leak. It empties you so gradually you don't notice the specific moment you became empty, only that one day you look down and there is nothing left in the glass, and you cannot even remember when the level started dropping.

I remember one night in particular, close to the end of that month, sitting on the edge of my bed with the lights off, listening to the ordinary sounds of the hostel around me: a door somewhere, laughter down the corridor, someone's music too low to identify the song, the whole building breathing its usual nighttime breath without me in it. I understood, with a clarity that felt almost peaceful, almost restful after weeks of noise, that I was more alone in that moment than I had ever been in my life, surrounded on every side by people who loved me and could not reach me, as if I had been lowered behind glass thick enough to let the light through but nothing else.

It was somewhere in that stretch of nights that the thought first arrived. I don't remember it arriving loudly. It came the way water finds a crack, quietly, patiently, taking the shape of whatever

space was left in me, filling exactly what it was given and no more. The thought was simple, almost gentle in its logic, which is, I think now, the most dangerous way such a thought can arrive: if this does not stop, and no one believes it will stop, and I cannot survive inside it much longer, then perhaps the kindest thing I could do, for myself, for the people who loved a version of me that no longer seemed to exist, was to end it. It did not feel, in that moment, like despair. It felt, God help me, like planning.

I did not act on it that night. But I noticed that I had thought it, turned it over the way you'd turn over a stone to see what lived underneath, and I noticed that some part of me, exhausted past the point of horror at itself, had not immediately recoiled from the idea. That frightened me more than the figure ever had. The figure, at least, was something outside me, something I could stand at a window and watch and, in some sense, hold apart from myself. This was a door opening from within, in a room I had thought was locked.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Newspaper

I want to tell this part carefully, because it is the part I understand least and remember most precisely, the way you remember the last few seconds before an accident in unbearable, frozen detail, every object in the room suddenly rendered in more resolution than the moment could possibly need.

I left campus on a Wednesday evening without telling anyone where I was going, because I no longer had anyone I trusted to tell, or more precisely, because I no longer trusted myself not to be talked out of it by the very people I would have told. I had heard, the way you hear these things, half by accident, a name passed between boys who thought I wasn't listening in the corridor outside the mess hall, of a man who could be found near the old bus depot after dark, and what he could be found for. I had filed it away without meaning to, the way you file away the location of a fire exit in a building you never expect to burn.

I won't pretend I don't remember the transaction. I remember it with a clarity that still turns my stomach: the depot's single working streetlamp buzzing overhead, moths circling it in a slow drunk orbit, the folded notes damp from my own palm, the small cold weight passed into my hand inside a strip of cloth that smelled faintly of machine oil, the man's eyes sliding off me the way eyes slide off something they've decided not to see, not out of kindness but out of a practiced, professional indifference. I remember that the whole exchange took less than two minutes, wordless almost throughout, and that I walked back to campus afterward feeling, obscenely, calmer than I had felt in weeks, as though I had finally, after two months of drifting, found the one solid decision left available to me.

Back in my room, door locked, curtain drawn against a window I had come to trust less than any other object in my life, the object sat in my lap with a stillness that seemed to match my own. It was heavier than I expected and colder than I expected, the metal holding onto the evening chill in a way that felt almost deliberate, and I remember thinking that it was strange how such a small thing could hold so much finality inside it, more finality, certainly, than anything else I owned.

My phone lit up on the desk, the screen's glow sudden and much too bright in the dark room. My mother's name on the screen, her photo, one from years ago, laughing at something out of frame, looking up at me with an expression I couldn't bear to look at directly, an expression that belonged to a version of my life I felt I had already left behind. I let it ring itself out, watching the screen count down the seconds without picking it up, each ring a small physical pressure against my chest. A few seconds later, a message arrived, the letters glowing too brightly in the dark room. Everything will be alright. We love you.

Ordinary words. The kind of words a mother sends a dozen times a year without thinking twice about them, dashed off between chores, meant as nothing more than a reflex of love. They undid

me more completely than anything else in this entire story, more than the gunshots, more than the figure, more than any of it, because they were the one thing in two months that had arrived from outside my ruined understanding of the world entirely unchanged, entirely innocent of what I had become.

I don't know how long I sat with the phone's light fading from the screen before my eyes drifted, for no reason I could name, to the folded newspaper *Awais* had left on my desk that morning, the one I hadn't bothered to open, dismissed at the time as just another one of his small unthinking kindnesses. Something about the fold of it, a headline visible in the crease, a single word I half recognized, pulled me toward it the way the courtyard window had pulled me two months earlier, an attraction that felt less like curiosity than like gravity. I leaned closer. I unfolded it.

There is no way to write the next sentence that will make it land the way it landed for me, sitting alone in that room with a gun in my lap and my mother's love glowing on a phone screen beside me, two facts that should never have been allowed to occupy the same small space at the same time. The headline was small, a few column inches on an inside page, tucked below an advertisement for a furniture sale, the kind of story that runs once and is forgotten by the next morning's edition, filed by someone who likely never thought about it again.

Student killed outside hostel, it said. And beneath it, in print so plain and so final that I read it four times before my mind would agree to process it, each reading no less devastating than the last, was my own name. My own photograph, the one from my student ID, the one where I am half smiling at a camera I didn't know would end up here, in this column, under this headline, attached to this fact. The date printed beside my name was the date of that first Tuesday night. The night of the courtyard.

Everything came apart and reassembled itself in the space of a single held breath, every piece I had been carrying separately for two months suddenly slotting into a shape I had refused, until that exact second, to let myself see. The figure with no face. The blood that vanished from the stone before anyone else could see it. The friends who loved me and could not, no matter how badly they wanted to, see what I saw, because there was nothing there for them to see, nothing at all, not because they were blind but because I was the only thing left in that hallway to be seen. I understood, all at once and with a completeness that left no room for doubt, no comforting crack of uncertainty to hide in, that I had not been witnessing a murder these past two months. I had been reliving one. My own.

I don't remember standing. I remember the bathroom tile cold under my feet, and the tap running, and cupping cold water in my hands and pressing it to my face the way you do when you're trying to wake from something, some part of me still, absurdly, hoping this was the kind of nightmare a person wakes from, though some deeper part of me already understood there would be no waking from this, that I had already had the only waking I was going to get, and it had not helped.

I lifted my head to the mirror slowly, the way you approach a thing you already know will hurt you, the way you'd approach a door behind which you already knew, with total certainty, what was waiting.

My own eyes looked back at me, exactly as I had always known them, the same brown, the same faint asymmetry my mother used to tease me about, except that they were wide now with an understanding no living man's eyes should ever have to hold. And in the center of my forehead, precise and dark and unmistakable, was a bullet hole, small and round, its edges strangely clean, almost surgical, as if whatever had made it had taken some terrible care in the making.

As I watched, unable to look away, unable to move, unable to do anything but stand there and receive it, a single bead of blood gathered at its edge and began its slow, deliberate path down toward my brow, unhurried, patient, the first of what I somehow understood, with a certainty that arrived from somewhere far beneath language, would be an endless, repeating fall.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mirror

I woke gasping, soaked through with a cold sweat that had turned my sheets clammy and cold against my back, sunlight already climbing the wall of my room in the ordinary, generous way it does on an ordinary morning, dust motes turning slow and golden in the shaft of it. For a moment I could not move, could not do anything but drag air into my lungs like a man surfacing from very deep water, each breath arriving as its own small, hard-won victory.

Then relief arrived, so total and so sweet that I laughed out loud into the empty room, a shaky, disbelieving sound that surprised even me. A dream. A nightmare beyond anything I had ever had, vivid enough to leave my hands trembling on the sheets, the phantom weight of a gun still somehow present in my palm, but only that, a dream, and dreams end, and I had woken, and the sun was up, and somewhere down the corridor I could hear the hostel coming to life the way it did every single morning, doors and voices and someone's bad singing in the shower three rooms down, off-key and cheerful and utterly, wonderfully mundane.

I laughed again, quieter this time, half at myself, wiping my eyes with the heel of my hand, and got up to face the day with a lightness in my chest I hadn't felt in what my dreaming mind had insisted was months. The shower felt like a baptism, water hot enough to sting some sense back into my skin. I dressed without thinking about it, the small unremarkable choreography of an ordinary morning, socks, shirt, the particular way I always rolled my sleeves, and crossed to my desk for my phone and my room key, already composing in my head the story I would tell Awais over breakfast, already imagining how we would both laugh about it.

That is when I saw it. Sitting on the wooden surface of my desk, precisely where it had sat in the dream, folded exactly as it had been folded, the same soft crease down the middle, was a newspaper.

I want to be honest and say that for one full second I told myself this meant nothing. Newspapers get left on desks. Awais was always leaving things in my room, magazines, notes, half-eaten packets of biscuits. It meant nothing, it meant nothing, I told myself this twice, then a third time, the words losing meaning the way any word does when repeated enough. My hand was already reaching for it, already trembling before I'd unfolded a single page, some part of me having already understood, with a dread that arrived ahead of any conscious thought, what the rest of me was still trying to argue itself out of.

It was the same newspaper. The same small headline, the same few column inches, the same photograph looking back up at me with its half smile, not knowing what it did not yet know, caught forever in that one instant of unearned innocence. The same date. The same name.

I don't remember dropping it so much as I remember it being on the floor, and myself standing over it, and the sunlit room around me starting, very slowly, to lose its certainty at the edges, the

way a photograph loses focus when you stare at it too long, colors bleeding gently into one another, the frame dissolving inward from the corners until only the center still holds any shape at all, and then not even that.



When the world came back into focus, it was no longer morning, and I was no longer in my room. I was standing in the courtyard. It was night. The air had that particular chill it gets an hour or so before the coldest part of the dark, and I understood, with the strange calm of someone who has finally stopped fighting the current, who has let the water simply take them where it was always going to take them, exactly where I was and exactly what was about to happen.

Because I had already lived it, as a witness, at a window, two months and one lifetime ago, though I now understood there had never really been two months, and there had never really been a window. There had only ever been this, this courtyard, this cold, this particular arrangement of stars I had, somewhere in the back of my mind, already memorized without knowing why.

Three figures stood in front of me, patient, unhurried, as if they too understood there was no rush left in any of this. A fourth stepped forward from among them, close enough now that the dark finally resolved into a face, and the face was the one I had trusted more than any other since the day I had arrived on this campus with a suitcase and my mother's voice still fresh in my ears, the face that had once made a stranger's grin feel like the beginning of a friendship.

It was Awais.

His face was not the face that had walked me to the cafeteria on my second day, not the one that had laughed too loud at his own jokes over cheap tea, not the one that had knocked so gently on my door to check if I was all right. This face was still, and cold, and entirely unfamiliar, wiped clean of every expression I had ever known it to make, and somewhere behind him stood Hamza and Ali, not moving to stop him, not moving at all, their silence its own kind of answer.

I did not run. I have asked myself since, if there is a since, if there is any place from which a person in my position gets to ask questions, why I didn't run, and I think the answer is that some part of me already knew running had never been available to me, had perhaps never been available to me even the first time, though I hadn't understood that then. This had already happened. I was not living it. I was remembering it, from the inside, one final time, the way a projector plays the same reel again because it does not know how to do anything else.

The gun came up, unhurried, almost gentle in the way it was raised, as though this were a small formality rather than an ending. I looked past it, at Awais's eyes, hoping to find something there: hesitation, grief, anything at all that would make this make sense, that would give the last moment of my life some shape I could understand, and found nothing but that terrible stillness, a stillness with no bottom to it.

The sound was smaller and larger than I remembered, the way it always is, the way, I understood now, it always would be, again and again, without end. Then the second shot, and the third, precise and final, the same period at the end of the same sentence it had always been going to end with.

I felt myself go down into the cold of the courtyard stones, the same shirt I had worn on that first ordinary Tuesday now dark and heavy against my chest, and the last thing my mind offered me, before it offered me nothing at all, was an image from very far away and long ago: a boy on a fourth day at university, unpacking a suitcase, listening to a knock at his door, believing without question that the young man on the other side of it wished him nothing but good. I held onto that image for as long as I was allowed to hold onto anything.

From above, if anyone had been watching, and no one ever was, they would have seen only this: a boy on the ground in an empty courtyard, a dark stain spreading slow and patient beneath his head, and, at the center of his stillness, a single wound, small and dark and perfectly round, catching what little light there was, holding it, for a moment, the way nothing else in that courtyard could.

It would still be there in the morning. And then, very quietly, it would not be. And somewhere, a boy would wake gasping into ordinary sunlight, certain, for one full second, that it had only ever been a dream.



THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On Aena

Aena began as a dream, the way I suspect most stories about mirrors do. I woke from it with the courtyard still vivid in my mind, the third shot still echoing, and the unbearable, simple horror of a boy discovering his own name in a newspaper he thought was someone else's. I wrote the screenplay first, chasing that same feeling in a more visual language, and this novella came after, an attempt to sit inside Umer's head for longer than a script's margins usually allow, to let his voice do the work that a camera would otherwise have to do in silence.

At its heart, Aena is a story about grief no one can see and disbelief dressed up as kindness, about how isolating it can be to carry a truth that the people who love you cannot, however hard they try, help you carry. I hope it unsettled you a little. I hope it also, in its own way, felt true.

Thank you for reading.

— *Zulqarnain Umar*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zulqarnain Umar is a writer and student whose work moves between screenwriting and prose, often circling the same unsettled territory: memory, perception, and the quiet horror of not being believed. Aena began as a screenplay before finding its second life as this novella.

This is his first published novella.